

To Live and Ride In Today's Marine Corps

EWS Contemporary Issue Paper

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20 February 2009

Report Documentation Page			Form Approved OMB No. 0704-0188		
Public reporting burden for the collection of information is estimated to average 1 hour per response, including the time for reviewing instructions, searching existing data sources, gathering and maintaining the data needed, and completing and reviewing the collection of information. Send comments regarding this burden estimate or any other aspect of this collection of information, including suggestions for reducing this burden, to Washington Headquarters Services, Directorate for Information Operations and Reports, 1215 Jefferson Davis Highway, Suite 1204, Arlington VA 22202-4302. Respondents should be aware that notwithstanding any other provision of law, no person shall be subject to a penalty for failing to comply with a collection of information if it does not display a currently valid OMB control number.					
1. REPORT DATE 20 FEB 2009		2. REPORT TYPE		3. DATES COVERED 00-00-2009 to 00-00-2009	
4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE To Live and Ride In Today's Marine Corps				5a. CONTRACT NUMBER	
				5b. GRANT NUMBER	
				5c. PROGRAM ELEMENT NUMBER	
6. AUTHOR(S)				5d. PROJECT NUMBER	
				5e. TASK NUMBER	
				5f. WORK UNIT NUMBER	
7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) United States Marine Corps, Command and Staff College, Marine Corps Combat Development Command, Marine Corps University, 2076 South Street, Quantico, VA, 22134-5068				8. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER	
9. SPONSORING/MONITORING AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES)				10. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S ACRONYM(S)	
				11. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S REPORT NUMBER(S)	
12. DISTRIBUTION/AVAILABILITY STATEMENT Approved for public release; distribution unlimited					
13. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES					
14. ABSTRACT					
15. SUBJECT TERMS					
16. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF:			17. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT Same as Report (SAR)	18. NUMBER OF PAGES 17	19a. NAME OF RESPONSIBLE PERSON
a. REPORT unclassified	b. ABSTRACT unclassified	c. THIS PAGE unclassified			

INTRODUCTION

Fiscal year 2008 marks a dark time for the Marine Corps and its illustrious history. Twenty-five motorcycle fatalities occurred that year, which is more than the number of combat deaths in Iraq for the same period. In fact, this marks the highest death toll of its kind for the Marine Corps in one fiscal year.¹ Due to these alarming fatalities the Commandant of the Marine Corps (CMC) has continually stressed motorcycle safety and the continued improvement of the motorcycle safety program. Marine leadership must be persistent in advocating the motorcycle safety program in order to arrest this staggering statistic. Undoubtedly, all facets of the Marine Corps Motorcycle Safety Program, to include upcoming changes and requirements, must always be mandated for all riders because it promotes continued safety awareness and over time will reduce injuries and fatalities.

BACKGROUND

¹ Larry Shaughnessy, "Marine Motorcycle Deaths Top Their Iraq Combat Fatalities", CNN, <http://www.cnn.com/2008/us/10/30/marine.motorcycles/index.html>, October 2008.


This past fiscal year, commands all over the Marine Corps have seen a recent surge concerning motorcycle safety. Fatalities have never been so prevalent. Some contribute the problem to young and inexperienced Marines coming back from Iraq looking for that adrenaline rush, while others contribute it to rising gas prices and the economy. Regardless of the reasons, Marines are dying, and something needs to be done, or done better, to lower motorcycle rider fatalities.

As previously stated, in FY 2008 25 motorcycle fatalities occurred in the Marine Corps compared with 19 in FY 2007.¹⁰ That is an increase of 32% in one year. Figure 1 below depicts Marine Corps motorcycle fatalities by rank and age, while figure 2 depicts how the Marines died and what type of motorcycle they were riding.



FY 2008 Motorcycle Fatalities *

01 Oct 07 – 30 Sep 08
Marine Corps

Rank	Total	Percent of Total	Statistics		Age	Total	Percent of Total
			FY08	FY07			
E2	4	16%	Fatalities: <u>25</u> ↑ (32%)	19	19	4	16%
E3	8	32%			20	3	12%
E4	3	12%	Day: <u>12</u> Night: <u>9</u> Dusk: <u>4</u>		21	4	16%
E5	3	12%			22	3	12%
E6	3	12%			23	2	8%
E7	3	12%			25	3	12%
O1	1	4%			32	1	4%
Total	25	100%			33	1	4%
					36	2	8%
					38	2	8%
					Total	25	100%

* Totals may not add to 100 due to rounding.

* Fatalities are all Marine Corps Military

Data as of 9 Oct 08. Based on WESS/PMV-MIR reports, telephonic notifications & PLRs. NR= Not Reported

Fig. 1



Narrative	Total	% of Total	Reported Standards Violations			Motorcycle	Type	Total	% of Total
			Violation	Total	% of Total Fatalities				
Speeding, Lost Control	5	20%	No Helmet	4	16%	Yamaha R1 600	Sport	5	20%
Speeding, ran into vehicle.	1	4%	No License	7	28%	Suzuki GSXR 600	Sport	4	16%
Ran into vehicle.	4	16%	No Documented Training	11	44%	Kawasaki ZX600	Sport	3	12%
Lost Control and hit object.	7	28%				Honda CBR 600	Sport	2	8%
Lost Control.	2	8%				Suzuki Hayabusha 1300	Sport	1	4%
Struck by vehicle pulling into traffic	0	0%				Suzuki GSX 750	Sport	1	4%
Struck by oncoming vehicle	1	4%				Yamaha V-Star 650	Cruiser	1	4%
Struck from behind.	0	0%				Yamaha YZF-R600	Sport	1	4%
Other vehicle pulled out in front of SNM.	2	8%				Harley Dyna Wide Glide 1450	Cruiser	1	4%
Unknown	3	12%				Yamaha R1 1000	Sport	1	4%
TOTAL	25	100%				Yamaha YZF 1000R	Sport	1	4%
						Harley Sportster 1200	Cruiser	1	4%
						Honda CBR 1000	Sport	1	4%
						Honda RVT 1000	Sport	1	4%
						Honda CBR 954	Sport	1	4%
						Total		25	100%

Type	Total	% of Total Motorcycles
Cruiser	3	12%
Sport	22	88%
Total	25	100

Fig. 2

Of note are the 44% who died and had no formal documented training. These could have been avoided had those Marines adhered to guidelines and requirements stated in the motorcycle safety program.

MARINE CORPS MOTORCYCLE SAFETY PROGRAM

Since 1972, military motorcycle riders have been required to complete the Motorcycle Safety Foundation's (MSF) Basic Rider Course to obtain a base access sticker.² The course consists of basic riding skills covered in a classroom environment along with practical application. Until recently this was all that was required of all Marine Corps motorcycle riders.

The Commandant of the Marine Corps, having concerns about recent statistics, released ALMAR 014/08. Although the message concerned private motor vehicle safety in general, the overall message was motorcycle safety, and within motorcycle safety, the growing concern was for the sport bike rider, who made up 22 of the 25 (88%) motorcycle fatalities for fiscal year 2008.³ The CMC expressed how leaders and riders must work together to stem

² Andrew Scutro, "Mandatory Safety Course Proposed for Sport Bikers", Marine Corps Times, June 2008, 10.

³ "FY 2008 Motorcycle Fatalities, Marine Corps", Naval Safety Center, http://safetycenter.navy.mil/ashore/motorvehicle/motorcycle/downloads/motorcycle-mishaps_USN_MC-FY08.ppt October 2008.

the drastic rise in motorcycle fatalities. To address this challenge, the Navy and Marine Corps, working with the MSF, developed the Military Sport Bike Rider Course (MSRC).⁴

AWARENESS

The Military Sport Bike Rider Course is being adopted in numerous Marine Corps installations and will be available soon to the remaining Marine Corps installations. Because of the aggressive nature common among sport bike riders, the MSRC focuses on specific riding aspects associated with sport bikes. Since most sport bike crashes occur during turns, the course focuses on motorcycle turns and lean angles. More often than not, riders crash in a turn from either too much speed or lack of knowledge reacting to certain situations during a turn. Misunderstanding the lean angles is another cause of crashes for sport bike riders.

While some feel the MSRC is a harsh requirement which alienates the sport bike community, the statistics prove that this training must be implemented in order to reduce the fatalities among these riders.

⁴ ALSAFE 030/08, "Military Sport Bike Rider Course", Naval Safety Center, <http://safetycenter.navy.mil/Messages/alsafe/files/2008/Alsafe08-030.txt>, May 2008.

THE OPPOSITION

With the recent surge of motorcycle safety concerns more and more Marines wonder why they must participate in the new programs and initiatives. If they have not been part of the problem or if they do not fit the statistics of those that need the programs, they argue, they should not be forced to participate.

Others argue that the increase in motorcycle safety requirements has been a result of the increase of young inexperienced Marines buying "too much bike" and riding outside their limits. These young inexperienced Marines fit "the profile," so, these opponents argue, safety programs should be focused on these riders, not the older, more experienced riders. Indeed, most of the Marines that were in accidents and mishaps were in the 18-23 year old age bracket, but those same riders had little to no experience riding motorcycles. They were at an age at which they felt invincible and sought the adrenaline rush that is innate with riding a motorcycle and felt they did not need training. Mandatory motorcycle training should be for younger riders; older and more experienced riders should not be penalized, they argue.

Others argue that if purchasing a motorcycle was forbidden until the Marine becomes a Sergeant then the Marine Corps would not only save money by not having to implement these new programs and initiatives, but there wouldn't be as many deaths. True as this may seem, the statistics revealed that 40% of the deaths in FY 2008 were Sergeants and above. The fact of the matter is that more and more Marines are buying motorcycles and, as a result, more and more are crashing and/or dying. The deaths are not due to rank or age; it is due to lack of experience and training, which is the reason why the motorcycle safety program and future improvements are required.

Along with age, in most instances, comes experience. Since Marines take care of Marines, having older and experienced riders participate in the new programs and such initiatives will help foster and instill safety and awareness in the younger inexperienced riders. The program will empower the experienced riders to set the example and the climate for the Marine Corps motorcycle community.

Still, some experienced riders find the new initiatives bothersome and downright insulting. Most that make the argument are experienced cruiser or standard type motorcycle riders who have been riding for years without any major incidents. They argue that the sport bike riders should be the main focus of

safety programs. After all, the statistics show that the majority of mishaps and deaths are from sport bike riders and not the standard or cruiser bike riders. The stigma and mentality of sport bike riders is to ride aggressively, they argue; taking risks is inherent with sport bikes.

The sport bike is defined as a bike that is race ready. The fairings on sport bikes, coupled with the rider sitting in a more prone position, vice an upright position on a cruiser, offer low-drag characteristics. Add to this that sport bikes normally have between 600-1400cc engines (See Appendix A) and it becomes apparent how speed and performance are the focus of sport bikes. As with any motorcycle, a plethora of modifications are possible. More often than not, the modifications for a sport bike, which can be very inexpensive, are intended to make the bike go faster, which is why this particular type of bike has been targeted with the creation of the MSRC. So, in essence, this aspect of the new programs and initiatives is focused on the sport bike rider and should put the cruiser and standard bike riders at ease.

REDUCING INJURIES & FATALITIES

The Commandant of the Marine Corps has placed a significant responsibility on the commands themselves to ensure Marines are taking the appropriate actions to prevent injuries and deaths among their motorcycle-riding peers. In fact, the Marine Corps Motorcycle Safety Program suggests commands form motorcycle safety clubs that enhance safety and awareness, which is paramount when riding a motorcycle. According to II MEF Policy Letter 03-06 written by Lt. Gen. James F. Amos in 2006, "command clubs should conduct monthly meetings during on-duty hours for all participants in order to keep new and current members abreast of relevant developments with training opportunities, upcoming club events and rides as well as to establish a sense of cohesion and purpose."⁵

The establishment of these clubs, especially, the organized rides, helps all riders with aspects of riding safely. Some argue that it is a wasted work day to let motorcycle riders go for a "safety ride" and unfair that non-riders still have to work. On the contrary, the "safety ride" enhances the overall unit strength because Marines are learning to ride safely, which reduces mishaps and consequently decreases lost man hours due to

⁵ "II MEF Motorcycle Clubs Start Up", US Fed News Service, Including US State News. Washington D.C.
<http://proquest.umi.com/pqdweb?did=1020876321&Fmt=3&clientid=32176&RQT=309&VName=PQD> 13 April 2006

injuries. Conceivably, these rides can be viewed as a training evolution vice a day off.

These meetings and rides can cover myriad subjects from basic maneuvering to wearing proper PPE (personal protective equipment), to past near-death experiences while riding. As of November 16, 2008, there were 18,074 Marine motorcycle riders (10,040 sport bike riders and 8,034 standard bike riders).⁶ If these command clubs can prevent even one out of the 18,074 Marine riders from having a motorcycle accident or death then it is time well spent.

However, some out there like Mr. Mike Parsons from the Headquarters USMC Safety Division have stated, "It seems there has been a push recently for mandatory club and motorcycle mentorship programs along with more restrictions on motorcyclists. The [MCCLL] survey did not allow me to express my belief that more restrictions and more programs would be a bad idea. As an example, the question [from the MCCLL survey] - 'What do you think is the most effective tool for reducing motorcycle mishaps?' did not provide me with a response option that expressed my view on this question. Emphasis on personal

⁶ "Motorcycle Safety Data Registration", Naval Safety Center, <http://www.safetycenter.navy.mil/ashore/motorvehicle/motorcycle/register.cfm> November 2008.

responsibility, motor vehicle operator attitude, and leadership by example will go a long way in reducing mishaps vice instituting more 'programs'."⁷

Apparently Mr. Parsons misunderstood what these "programs" do because these "programs" focus on personal responsibility, motor vehicle operator attitude, and leadership by example. Without the clubs and programs, Marines do not have an arena in which to discuss these matters and learn from other motorcycle riders. The clubs give the riders a sense of camaraderie and the chance to go on a group ride with safety in mind. As motorcycle owners increase, the more important these clubs and programs will become.

RECOMMENDATION

While introducing new requirements aimed at reducing motorcycle mishaps, the Marine Corps could take it a step further and require annual refresher training for motorcycle riders until they reach age 26, similar to the Drivers Improvement Course requirements for standard vehicles. This would target the "at-risk" bike rider category and compliment

⁷ "Comments on the MCCLL Motorcycle Safety Survey", MCCLL Newsletter, June 2007, 9.

the motorcycle safety program to reduce motorcycle accidents and mishaps. Participation could be as simple as taking the Experienced Rider Course offered by the MSF or, if a sport bike rider, retaking the MSRC. It does not matter what course is taken; all that matters is the ongoing pursuit of motorcycle safety. Participation could even extend to those riders who show proof of taking and successfully passing an approved road race course or partaking in "track days" that provide specific riding technique instruction. These and other instruction forums could exempt the Marine from the annual training.

CONCLUSION

At the end of the day, 25 Marines still lost their lives needlessly. To add to that statistic, as of 4 December 2008, two more Marine motorcycle fatalities have occurred.⁸ Every single one of those deaths could have been prevented. The Marine Corps has recognized the problem and is stepping in the right direction by being evermore so vigilant in mandating the Marine Corps Motorcycle Safety Program. With riders adhering to the

⁸ "FY 2009 Motorcycle Fatalities, Marine Corps", Naval Safety Center, <http://www.safetycenter.navy.mil/statistics/ashore/motorvehicle/default.htm> 4 December 2008.

safety program, motorcycle rider mishaps and deaths will decline. The Marine Corps puts forth every effort to prevent Marines dying in combat and the Marine Corps owes it to them to do the same here at home.

Word Count without footnotes: 2060

APPENDIX A

The following provides clarification for all types of bikes discussed:

-Super sport bikes (also known as middleweight sport bikes) are sharply focused for optimal performance on a race track. They are generally built around a high revving, small displacement powerplant that is usually sized around 600 cc (36.6 cu in) to 800 cc (48.8 cu in).⁹

-Super bikes are large displacement super sport bikes. They have characteristics similar to the smaller super sport bikes which are mainly focused on race track performance, but are powered by larger engines that are usually sized around 800 cc (48.8 cu in) to 1,200 cc (73.2 cu in).¹⁰

-Hyper sport bikes are very large displacement sport bikes with a strong emphasis on top speed and acceleration. They typically are powered by motors displacing 1,100 cc (67.1 cu in) to 1,400 cc (85.4 cu in).¹¹

⁹ "Super Sport Bike Definition", Motorcycle Safety Foundation, <http://www.msf-usa.org>

¹⁰ "Super Bike Definition", Motorcycle Safety Foundation, <http://www.msf-usa.org>

¹¹ "Hyper Sport Bike Definition", Motorcycle Safety Foundation, <http://www.msf-usa.org>

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